

Simsbury Fly-In offers something for the whole family

By: John Fitts, Staff Writer

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Above all, organizers of the Simsbury Fly-In look to make the event a family-friendly community-oriented show that not only features airplanes, but also classic cars, public safety demonstrations, live music, community groups and children's activities.

And from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sept. 21 (rain date Sept. 28), the Simsbury Flying Club, Simsbury-based Valley Classic Wheels Car Club and Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 324 will present the 23rd annual event at Simsbury Airport. The event is not an air show, in which pilots perform amazing aerobatics for the crowd, but instead allows people to get up close to amazing array of aircraft - and cars - and get a sense of their history, use, practical measures and fun details. Spectators will have the chance to look in cockpits, study engines and talk to pilots, manufacturers and other aviation enthusiasts. Last year, more than 200 airplanes were at the event.



2007 Fly-In attendees get a closer view of the airplanes and cars.
Photo by Phil Worley

There will also be a chance to see a wide array of classic and antique cars of all types as last year some 350 car enthusiasts showed their vehicles. "It's a grass-roots situation in that people who are not typically around airplanes get to see grass-roots aviation up close," said Simsbury Airport manager and Canton resident Bill Thomas. Those different roots include home-built planes, old military craft, practical planes

used for business and the latest offering in sport aviation.

And there will be the chance to witness flyovers and the demonstration of military formations. And many planes will be flying in under the strict procedures and accompanied by wing walkers after landing.

"One of the things we strive for is to make the show as safe as humanly possible," said Fly-In Chairman Joe Bellino.

As chairman of the event and a member of the Simsbury Volunteer Ambulance Association, Bellino said that since the Simsbury Flying Club took over the event 10 years ago from the Antique Airplane Club of Connecticut, it has included the mock extrication with live "victims," members of the Simsbury's emergency crews such as the Simsbury Volunteer Fire Company and ambulance service, and a visit from a LifeStar helicopter.

"It gives them (LifeStar) a chance to show what they do," Bellino said.

The kids of course, love the helicopter visit, but the steps emergency crews go through in such an event are broadcast over a PA system, giving attendees an important safety lesson as well. The show will also include live music, a kiddie land area with activities such as a bounce house, a dog watering area (dogs need to be on leashes at the event), and an exhibit and booth area where attendees can learn about local groups or aviation organizations.

It all adds up to family fun but also a chance for the airport to remain viable and connect with the community. While many community airports have closed in recent years, Simsbury has been proactive in trying to avoid the same fate. The airport is privately owned and maintained and operated by the non-profit Simsbury Flying Club. The town of Simsbury is conducting a feasibility study to look into the possibility of purchasing the airport. Meanwhile, the fly-ins and corresponding magazine, complete with advertising, have helped keep it open.

"Without our fly-in, I'm not sure our airport would survive," Bellino said.

And although the event has grown to the largest of its kind in New England and often draws between 8,000 and 10,000 spectators, Bellino said the community aspect remains most important.

"The basic idea is for the airport to become friends with the town," he said. "Over the last 10 years, we've done that."

The event is free, but a donation is appreciated. Families are asked to give \$5 if they can. The airport is located on Wolcott Road. Motorists are advised to approach from Route 10 past the Simsbury Pharmacy (plaza) as Wolcott Road will become a one-way route northbound, partially due to the work on the Floydville Road Bridge in East Granby. In addition, signs will help direct motorists to and from the event.

For more information, including information in the event of inclement weather, log on to simsburyairport.com. Those with questions about the event can also call Bellino at 408-0040.